

Prototype Theory and the Categorization of Autism

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My research interests lie in extremely interdisciplinary areas with no real departments of their own: critical linguistics, disability studies, queer studies, and so on. Therefore, it's necessary for me to stage independent research, and the Lipson research grant gave me the ability to do this. I began with a premise that I now realize to be extremely vague: using theories from cognitive linguistics regarding categorization to describe how the autism spectrum is described and categorized. I came out of the summer with an annotated bibliography, the outlines of various analyses to be brought together at a later date, and the beginnings of a paper to be worked on and sent out via the proper venues.

My mentor, Mel Chen of the Gender & Women Studies Department, was thrilled to work with me. I had been assisting her with a project analyzing discourse around autism via queer studies and disability studies via URAP, so the beginning of the project didn't feel too different from before: She suggested papers for me to look at and some guiding principles for my arguments. Something I wasn't expecting, though, was that during the summer, my mentor wouldn't necessarily be at Berkeley at all times. We kept in contact via email, but it feels as though I would have been motivated to gather more information if I had checked in with her more regularly.

Given the nature of my research, I spent the vast majority of my time in libraries, either physical or electronic. While it is great to be able to do research anywhere, meaning the weeks I spent at home weren't too much of an interruption, being able to stay in Berkeley and close to UC Berkeley's libraries was a great experience. The interdisciplinary nature of my research meant that I read from a wide range of topics: There was always a new direction to go in. I read papers from psychologists, clinical psychiatrists, linguists, cognitive scientists, and perhaps most importantly, autistic individuals speaking about their own experiences.

What was interesting about doing research over the summer was the sheer amount of time I had. Typically, I would have to decide on a topic very early in the process, and any

research outside of that narrow topic was wasting time. This summer, however, I could follow nearly any train of thought I had. I believe this greatly benefited my final product: For instance, I found that there were other researchers attempting to bring prototype theory (a cognitive linguistic theory about how categories are structured in the mind) into the diagnosis of personality disorders. By following this thread, I not only discovered what psychiatrists thought of prototype theory, but I also was left with a great deal of curiosity and a possible future direction for this thread of research to head in.

By the end of the summer, I had solidified my original premise into a number of more manageable pieces. I spent the last few weeks of summer working on an analysis of how the definition and categorization of autism is tied into a broader linguistic theory that definitions are typically “interactional properties”—that is, that categories are defined by how they relate to humans, although with autism as an example, I argue that this may be better explained as how they relate to *society*. While my future honors thesis will relate to a different topic, I plan to further construct this work as an independent study project in a future semester.